

Gorbachev Strong but Still Vulnerable, CIA Aide Says

By ROBERT C. TOTH, *Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON—In the first public intelligence assessment of the recent Kremlin shake-up, Deputy CIA Director Robert M. Gates said Friday that Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev demonstrated his power but also exposed his continuing vulnerability by shifting opponents and adding supporters to the Politburo.

According to Gates, the Soviet leader can count on only three or four sure votes for his reform effort on the 12-man Politburo even after what the CIA official called Gorbachev's "power play" earlier this month.

Gorbachev's two key opponents were moved into still-powerful positions on the Politburo, he failed to win a seat for an important protege and he was unable to remove a Ukrainian party boss who opposes him, Gates said. Thus, he concluded, "while this set goes to Gorbachev, the match is far from over."

Gates, addressing a colloquium on national security sponsored by the American Assn. for the Advancement of Science, portrayed Gorbachev as less of a clear winner than have State Department officials and some non-government experts.

Trained as a Soviet analyst, Gates has two roles: deputy chief of the Central Intelligence Agency and deputy director of the government-wide intelligence community, which encompasses the National Security Agency and the Pentagon's various intelligence agencies. His assessment of recent events in Moscow is believed to be a product of the entire intelligence community rather than of any one agency.

Gates said Gorbachev is risking instability within the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe by relaxing political controls.

The CIA, he said, has "counted some 600 popular disturbances since early 1987, about half of them relating to ethnic issues." This year has seen "major nationalist demonstrations" in nine of the 15 Soviet republics, he said, including those in the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—as well as in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In response to a question, Gates said that "the most immediate threat to Gorbachev soon would be an explosion in Eastern Europe" or the perception by Kremlin critics that Moscow is losing control in the republics around the Soviet periphery.

Ukraine May Be Key

He said Gorbachev may be particularly fearful of unrest in the Ukraine, which is a major food producer with intense nationalist pride. The Ukrainian leader, Vladimir V. Shcherbitsky, is the only regional party boss still in office since the time of the Leonid I. Brezhnev.

"I think Gorbachev is afraid the Ukraine would go up in flames if he [Shcherbitsky] were taken off the Politburo," Gates said.

Nevertheless, Gorbachev has "declared war on the party apparatus," Gates said, as he has come to recognize it as the chief obstacle to his modernization and reform programs. He said Gorbachev's methods in pushing through personnel changes at party and parliamentary meetings two weeks ago smacked of old-time totalitarianism.

"After all the talk of *glasnost* [openness] and democratization, Stalin would have been proud of the smoothly orchestrated 44-minute Supreme Soviet session in which people were fired, retired, demoted and promoted with no dissent or even discussion and 1,500 delegates voting as one," Gates said.

"The session was a power play in the grand and traditional Soviet manner. While the session was a testimony to Gorbachev's power, the need for it also was a mark of his vulnerability and his frustration at the lack of progress, bureaucratic obstructionism and opposition in the party to his programs and policies—and of the desperate situation facing the Soviet Union."

Despite the political upheaval that Gorbachev has triggered, Gates said, he has made small and frequently ineffective economic changes.

"The war to change fundamentally the main pillars of the Stalinist economic system at this point is being lost," he said, with "little if any slowing in the downward spiral of the Soviet economy" over the last three years.

Growth in the Soviet gross national product fell to less than 1% last year from 4% in 1986 and will be only 2% to 3% this year, he said. Moreover, he added, Gorbachev needs annual growth of nearly 8% in both 1989 and 1990 to meet his five-year plan targets, and those goals are now "far beyond reach."

Under Gorbachev, he said, the Soviet budget deficit has soared to a level of about 7% of GNP, compared to a combined high of 3.5% for the U.S. state and federal budget deficits two years ago. He said the Soviets are borrowing roughly twice as much these days as the U.S. government is, although the accumulated U.S. federal debt is much higher.

But no cut in Soviet military spending is apparent, he said, adding that "at this point we see no slackening of Soviet weapons production or programs."

"Virtually all of their principal strategic weapons will be replaced with new, more sophisticated systems by the mid-1990s," he said, "and a new strategic bomber is being added to their arsenal for the first time in decades. As the rate of growth of our defense budget declines again, theirs continues to grow, albeit slowly."